DOE site cleanup long-term proposition

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Local, state and federal officials were all smiles at the Sept. 10 unveiling of the wall display depicting the history of the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant at the U.S. Department of Energy headquarters in Washington, D.C. From left are U.S. Rep. Ed Whitfield; U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell; Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz; Paducah Mayor Gayle Kaler; Clyde Elrod, who was involved in the construction of the plant; McCracken County Judge-Executive Bob Leeper; and Len Peters, Kentuckyâ s secretary of energy and environment.

Now that deactivation and decommissioning of the U.S. Department of Energy's Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant is well underway, all parties involved - especially the community - are focusing on the long term.

The plant, approximately 10 miles west of Paducah, is a government-owned uranium enrichment plant that was constructed in the early 1950s and operated by DOE through the use of contractors. It manufactured enriched uranium for the fabrication of fuel assemblies for commercial and military nuclear reactors and weapons development activities.

In 1993, operational responsibility for uranium enrichment was transferred to the United States Enrichment Corp. USEC ceased operations in May 2013 and returned the facilities to DOE control in October 2014. DOE land holdings at the plant site total 3,556 acres, including a 1,570-acre industrial area and 1,986 acres licensed to the state of Kentucky as part of the West Kentucky Wildlife Management Area.

"As you know, for years they have employed 1,800 and at times even more than that," Sandra Wilson, president of the Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce, said prior to the organization's mid-September annual trip to Washington, D.C., to advocate on behalf of the community.

"It (the plant) has operated under many different names, and when it closed it became a priority for this community to keep the cleanup going. We appreciate Fluor (Federal Services), who is the lead contractor out there, and all the others that are working there. We want to make sure that adequate funding keeps coming to this community."

According to Wilson, "We have almost replaced every job that was lost when USEC closed. Those are good jobs, so we're very appreciative of that."

Stan Eckenberg, chairman of the Paducah Economic Development board, echoed those sentiments.

"Those are highly skilled workers that they need out there, and they are hiring people regularly," Eckenberg said. "That's a function that is positive. Those will be long-term jobs."

Kentucky's federal delegation, including U.S. Sens. Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul, and U.S. Rep. Ed Whitfield, have urged the DOE to develop a long-term strategy to ensure the cleanup is done properly.

Officials for both DOE and Fluor, its chief contractor, have reiterated their long-term commitment to the plant cleanup.

At the invitation of local officials, David Klaus, DOE deputy undersecretary for management and performance, and Mark Whitney, DOE's principal deputy assistant for environmental management, came to Paducah earlier this year to tour the plant site and meet employees.

"I was impressed by the community and the support you all have for the Department of Energy," Klaus told a private reception sponsored by the chamber. "I was impressed by the chance to meet with the folks working at the plant. You can tell they really care."

Whitney said the pair's visit should be viewed "as a commitment to the cleanup work in Paducah. I want you to know the Paducah cleanup, the work you do here, is vitally important to us and now that I've seen it and understand it better ... we'll continue to be a champion for it."

The DOE awarded a three-year contract, with an estimated $420 million value, to Fluor in July 2014. Speaking at a chamber of commerce breakfast earlier this summer, a Fluor official said the contractor has its eye on a longer-term commitment as well.

"Obviously, we're not just interested in staying here three years," said Tom D'Agostino, with Fluor's government affairs group. "We want to stay here for the long term. We think long-term commitments are important for communities to continue to grow and have sustainable growth."

This summer, Fluor took over all of the remediation work that was being done by another contractor, LATA Services of Kentucky. While LATA Kentucky's contract ended in July, its parent company, LATA-Sharp Remediation Services, continues work at the site as a team partner with Fluor. The majority of LATA employees transitioned to Fluor as well.

Flour also has a second teaming partner at the site, Chicago Bridge & Iron, which has a background in nuclear maintenance and management.

Preference is given to laid-off USEC employees at the site by Fluor and Swift & Staley, the infrastructure support services contractor. Swift & Staley was recently awarded a contract valued at $138.8 million, with a potential value of $177.2 million.

To help meet the needs of the contractors at the site, West Kentucky Community and Technical College, with the assistance of several other local organizations like Paducah Economic Development, brought back its workforce classes to train radiation control technicians. WKCTC used to provide the classes when USEC was operating at the plant, but they were suspended when layoffs began, in preparation for deactivation process.

"These positions are in high demand both locally and around the country," according to Scott Darnell, president/CEO of Paducah Economic Development. "This is a great example of community collaboration designed to produce quality careers for our deserving local workforce."

In addition to hiring workers, Fluor hosted a vendor forum earlier this year in which 170 vendors had an opportunity to showcase their services.

"The mission has really changed," according to Bob Nichols, Fluor Paducah director of plant facilities, operations and infrastructure. "It's not surprising that folks would want to participate in the new mission going forward.

"USEC was in a production mode, and we are here to basically take the site and transform it into a deactivation project," Nichols said. "We go into the facilities and clean out hazardous materials so we can bring the facility down to a hazard condition that is about as minimum as you can get: more like an industrial facility."